

Georgians, Armenians Row Over Vanishing Monuments

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Ancient church is target of allegations from religious leaders of both countries.

A long-running dispute about the alleged vandalism of medieval Armenian gravestones in the Georgian capital Tbilisi is still raging between the churches of both countries.

In early May, the Georgian diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church released a statement saying in effect that inscriptions from the Norashen church - which they claim as an Armenian site - had been destroyed and replaced with Georgian ones.

“Gravestones with Georgian inscriptions suddenly appeared in the yard of the Norashen Armenian church [in the old quarter of Tbilisi] this spring,” said the statement. “At the same time, the Armenian gravestones that have been in the churchyard for centuries were moved and the inscriptions on them erased.”

The scandal around Norashen has brought to the surface a long-running dispute between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church over ownership of a number of religious buildings in Georgia.

“Over the past 15 years, the Georgian clergy has occupied and consecrated several Armenian churches in Tbilisi - including Kusanats Surb Stepanos, St Bethlehem, the Khikhoy chapel, and several other churches,” the Armenian statement went on. “The same is expected to happen to Norashen and another Armenian church named Surb Nshan.”

The alarming reports from the medieval church of Norashen triggered angry responses in the Armenian press, with journalists reporting on the “enforced Georgianisation” of Armenian churches in Tbilisi and elsewhere in Georgia.

In response, young Armenians organised protest actions near Norashen and the Georgian embassy in Armenia. “The Georgians have so many historic monuments,” said Mari Mikoyan, a student who heads the Nor Serund organisation, the youth union of Georgia's Armenians. “Why should they need to take someone else's culture for their own?”

According to the 2002 census, almost 250,000 Armenians now live in Georgia, forming 5.7 per cent of its population. In Tbilisi, which has strong Armenian traditions, 7.6 per cent of the population is now Armenian. Both communities have very different views on the history of the city.

The Sioni cathedral, a synagogue, a mosque, and a functioning Armenian church Surb Gevork are all close to one another in the Meidan district of old Tbilisi. Norashen is also situated in this area but its status has never been so clear and the church has been closed for decades.

Sixty-eight-year-old Shota Lezhava was born and grew up in Meidan. “I have lived all my life in old Tbilisi, as did my father before me. We always thought that this was a Georgian church,” he told IWPR.

“I do not remember its name precisely, or whether it has ever been open. What I know is that there was a library in the building in the Soviet times. I have heard a legend about a Georgian nobleman who lost this

church to an Armenian merchant – but that is just a story.”

At the Georgian Patriarchate, the deputy spokesman, Zurab Tskhovrebadze, said he had no knowledge of any changes at Norashen.

And Father Tariel, a Georgian priest whom the Armenian side has accused of vandalism, said that the only thing that he had done was to clean the yard of rubbish.

“We share a yard [with the Jvris Mama Georgian temple situated next to Norashen] and I was busy with that. I planted trees there,” Father Tariel told IWPR. “I did not touch gravestones. How could I insult the souls of the dead? The Armenians are just afraid that I will enter this church but I am not going to do that. For now at any rate.”

However, government officials conceded that changes had been made at the church.

Nika Vacheishvili, head of the state department for the protection of monuments, said “some changes have indeed taken place on Norashen's territory. In particular, Armenian gravestones have been moved from one place to another”. Vacheishvili also alleged that Father Tariel was responsible for this.

“We condemn his actions,” Vacheishvili said. “The status of a particular church is a confessional issue and it should be resolved between the two countries' churches. The Georgian state has a firm position that any cultural monument should be protected irrespective of its confessional status.”

Samvel Karapetian, a historian with the Research on Armenian Architecture organisation, which monitors Armenian monuments outside Armenia, insists that an act of vandalism has taken place.

“The erasing of traces of Armenian culture at Norashen started in 1989 and continued actively in 1995 when Armenian inscriptions, two khachkars [cross-stones], and two 19th-century frescoes were destroyed,” said Karapetian, adding that following the 1995 incident two Armenian archbishops, Garegin and Grigor, came to Tbilisi from Armenia to meet Georgian Patriarch Ilya II and all work on the church was suspended until it was decided to whom it belonged.

“However, Armenian gravestones disappeared from the church this spring and Georgian ones appeared instead of them,” continued Karapetian. “These are not just words. I have photographs of the stones that are no longer there.”

Georgian historian Lasha Bakradze told IWPR “perhaps there was a Georgian church on this site formerly but this is an Armenian building”.

Georgian prime minister Zurab Nogaideli told journalists in Yerevan that he did not want the government to become involved in the dispute, and urged the churches to agree a solution amongst themselves.

Tskhovrebadze of the Georgian Patriarchate said that his church leadership has proposed setting up a joint commission of Georgian and Armenian specialists to consider all issues connected with disputed controversial churches and monasteries.

“The Georgian Orthodox Church has its own grievances against the Armenian side. In particular, we mean changes in the Georgian churches in Javakheti [the southern Georgian province predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians] and we are ready to discuss this issue,” said Tskhovrebadze.

At the end of April, Armenia’s parliamentary speaker Artur Bagdasarian met Georgian patriarch Ilya II and they also agreed that a commission should be formed. However nothing has been do so far.

The Georgian diocese of the Armenian church has kept quiet on the issue and numerous efforts by IWPR to talk to Bishop Vazgen Mirzakhanian were unsuccessful. “The bilateral commission has not been created, therefore, we will refrain from any additional comments,” said Gayane Bostanjian of the press service of the diocese.

Although there is a lull in the row around the disputed church, Tbilisi Armenians are worried that the last evidence of Armenian history in Norashen may be erased before the promised commission begins work.

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